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2018 Landscape for State, National Politics

By Jeff Mayers, WisPolitics.com President

Usually a good economy is good for incumbents. And by most any account, the economy in late fall 2017 was doing very well—low unemployment, steady growth, and good results in the stock markets. But with polarization pulsating through Madison and Washington, D.C. and through the electorate, election watchers say 2018 could be a year of change at the ballot box.

History says the party in power in Washington, D.C. often struggles in the first mid-term election—even more so when the new president's numbers are poor. That history and Fall results across the country appeared in late 2017 to give some early momentum to Democrats as Gov. **Scott Walker** formally launched his bid for a third, four-year term and more Democrats swelled the field of challengers (a field mocked by Republicans as weak).

Also getting top billing on the 2018 ballot is the U.S. Senate race. Democrat **Tammy Baldwin** of Madison will have a strong challenge from Republicans in her first re-election bid after beating **Tommy Thompson** in 2012. As of late 2017, the major GOP challengers were state Sen. **Leah Vukmir** of Brookfield and Marine combat veteran and business consultant **Kevin Nicholson** of Delafield. Big money was already flowing into the race from inside and outside Wisconsin as of this writing—confirming the high national stakes: control of the U.S. Senate.

So what was the political environment in late 2017? Polling that shows 41% of Wisconsin voters strongly disapprove of President **Donald Trump's** job performance could make for a “challenging environment” for Republican candidates in next year's races, according to the CEO of D.C. polling firm Morning Consult.

The results also showed Trump's approval in the state of Wisconsin was lower than it was nationally—35% of Wisconsin voters strongly or somewhat approve compared to 40% across the country. Of those findings, just 14% in Wisconsin strongly approve of Trump's performance compared to 18% nationally.

The firm's co-founder and CEO **Michael Ramlet** referred to that as a “softer base”—something that should be making Wisconsin GOP politicians nervous. “When I start looking at Trump's approval, this is where I would start to get antsy if I was a Republican member or senator or candidate,” the Wisconsin native told a WisPolitics.com breakfast in D.C. in November.

The poll also found Walker's approval rating underwater, with 50% of respondents who somewhat or strongly disapprove of the job he was doing while 41% somewhat or strongly approve.

Meanwhile, Walker's approval was highest among Wisconsin Republicans, where 80% either strongly or somewhat approved of his performance. But among Dems, 80% instead either strongly or somewhat disapproved.

As for Baldwin, 38% of respondents strongly or somewhat approved of her work while 41% somewhat or strongly disapproved; 19% said they didn't know or didn't have an opinion, despite Baldwin facing a “pretty competitive race” in 2012 against Thompson, Ramlet said, adding: “That was six years ago, and it seems like a lifetime ago in American politics.”

And, he noted, last time around Baldwin—along with the other U.S. senators up for re-election—ran during a President Obama re-election bid, saying the coalition he put together looks “very different” from the voter base in a mid-term election.

Of the poll respondents who supported **Hillary Clinton** for president last year, 67% strongly or somewhat approved of Baldwin while only 18% strongly or somewhat disapproved. Among Trump supporters: 73% strongly or somewhat disapproved of the Madison Dem while only 17% strongly or somewhat approved.

But Ramlet predicted independent voters would be the ones “that will really kick in in this race”—especially those who only registered a somewhat approval or disapproval of Baldwin.

The poll's results show 28% of respondents who identify as independent somewhat approved of Baldwin, 6% strongly approved, and 22% each strongly or somewhat disapproved, while the remaining 22% didn't have an opinion.

Another poll from a different firm showed similar results. The poll from the Dem firm Public Policy Polling found Walker trailing a generic Democratic opponent and his job approval numbers upside down; 43% of voters surveyed approve of the job he's doing, while 49% do not. Meanwhile, a generic Dem opponent led 48-43.

In addition, the statewide automated phone poll of more than 1,100 registered voters in October showed:

- 40% approved of the job Trump was doing, while 52% disapproved.
- And Dems led the generic legislative ballot 44-41, but Republicans have strong majorities in the state Assembly and Senate.

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